Cortin Times

EDITORIAL/OPINION Monday, June 5, 1995 Page 4

Agnew joins absolution club

You probably heard that Spiro Agnew got rehabilitated the other day. A white marble bust of his likeness was placed in the U.S. Capitol building with no warning label to alert passing tourists that what they see isn't what he was.

Surely you remember Spiro. He's the guy that went from high-muckety-muck in the local Kiwanis Club to executive of Baltimore County to governor of Maryland to Richard Nixon's vice president in a span of about 10 years. After serving nearly five years as veep, he chose not to contest the government's allegation that he failed to pay income taxes on certain bribes he claimed he never took and resigned his office.

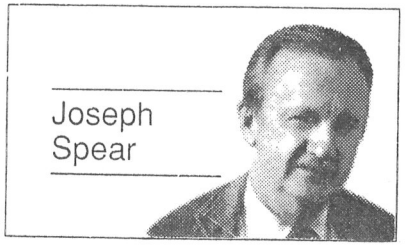
For the past two decades, he has been living the quiet life in Rancho Mirage, Calif., exploiting his fame and his friendships with various luminaries to wangle business deals.

As best I can tell, he is the last of the old Nixon crowd to be accepted back into general society. Chuck Colson, John Ehrlichman, G. Gordon Liddy — all have been forgiven. Now Spiro Agnew. It is one of the more disturbing trends of recent times.

The most celebrated comeback of all, of course, was that of Richard Nixon himself. By the time he passed away a year ago, he had written two memoirs to dispel the "myths" the evil media had told about him and had built a private "library" to depict the real Nixon story. Every Nixon enemy in the nation, save myself and historian Stanley Kutler and a few other refuseniks, had cradled him to their bosoms.

On April 26, the Richard Nixon Reconstruction Project was finally completed when the Postal Service issued a 32-cent Nixon stamp, which I refuse to buy and certainly will never lick.

The Agnew reclamation was a bit trickier, primarily because he was a cruder (alleged) crook than the rest of the Nixon gang. As governor of Maryland, he had (allegedly) maintained the tradition of accepting kickbacks and bribes from engineers and contractors seeking business with the state. As vice president, he (allegedly) continued accepting payments from his old suitors, who sometimes (allegedly) showed up in his Washington office to deliver plain envelopes stuffed with cash.



All this (alleged) malfeasance came to light in 1973, when a federal grand jury began investigating Agnew and soon put together what Attorney General Elliot Richardson said was the most "cut-and-dried" case he had ever seen. On Oct. 10, in a Baltimore courtroom, Agnew pleaded nolo contendere to a tax-evasion charge — meaning he was claiming he didn't do it but would never do it again — and stood silently by while the attorney general read a list of his (alleged) transgressions.

The judge sentenced Agnew to three years of probation and a $10,000 fine. Then Agnew resigned from the vice presidency.

He never stopped arguing his innocence, once claiming he had been removed from the line of secession in favor of someone who "would defend Israel, whatever the risk" to the United States.

The Agnew restoration started when some forgiving soul rehung his portrait in the Baltimore County office building in Towson, Md. Then in April of this year, the new Democratic governor of Maryland, Parris Glendening, ordered Agnew's portrait dusted off and reinstalled on a State House wall. The state of Maryland was "not Stalinist Russia where people become nonpersons," Glendening said at the time. "Better hung than hanged," said columnist William Safire, who as a Nixon administration speechwriter once put words in Spiro's mouth.

Now Agnew has been fully reconstructed and honored with a marble bust under the U.S. Capitol dome. The sad thing is, it's only a head-to-chest thing, which means that even when the Democrats return to power, they can't attach a ball-and-chain, and thousands of people who pass by it every year will go home thinking Spiro Agnew is an American icon.

I personally think that's taking absolution a bit too far.